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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, DS, AND M

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018  
TAGS: PREL ASEC ABLD SY  
SUBJECT: SARG VIEWS ON NEW EMBASSY COMPOUND

REF: A. DAMASCUS 722  
B. DAMASCUS 676

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (S/NF) A Palestinian American academic who enjoys frequent access to SARG FM Muallim told us October 23 that Muallim believes that the U.S. Embassy is exaggerating the threat in Damascus and "can wait" until such time as the SARG finds a location for a NEC. The implication was that the SARG is not actually even looking for site at present. Muallim reportedly said "the Embassy just wants to build a facility where they can increase their ability to spy on us . . . We are not going to help them do that . . . They get enough intelligence from their satellites . . ." The SARG had no plans to agree to any site selected by the USG (because those sites would implicitly permit the putative expansion of espionage activities) but would at some point find a site where the U.S. would not be able to "spy" on Syria.

¶2. (C/NF) Recently, we heard from a Norwegian diplomat that the Ya'afour diplomatic zone was dead in the water. Obviously, the MFA tells us a different story (ref A) but we also note that there has been no actual progress made in their planning in four years. It could well be that the SARG is using the prospect of a Ya'afour development as a means of "managing" the U.S. Embassy until whenever they are forced to "find" a site for a NEC. (Note: Egypt and Iran are building embassies currently in suburban Damascus. The MFA told us that these two projects were "exceptions" to the requirement that all new embassies be constructed in Ya'afour. End Note)

¶3. (S/NF) Comment: The remarks attributed to Muallim above were made before the October 26 event in Abu Kamal for which the SARG holds the USG responsible. Among the SARG's initial retaliatory measures are reports that the SARG intends to close the "American School" and the "American Cultural Center." We have not yet received confirmation from the SARG of its intentions, it is also unclear to us which Public Diplomacy activities they include under the term "cultural center." Given the current crisis, however, it is less likely than ever that the question of a NEC can be handled as anything other than a political bilateral issue.

CONNELLY